

RA RGAN TSHANG: AN A MDO TIBETAN  
HERDERS' WECHAT GROUP

Pad+ma rig 'dzin པད་མཁའ་རྒྱལ་འཛིན།

ABSTRACT

WeChat is used by many Tibetan communities. Ra rgan tshang is a WeChat group associated with Ra rgan Brigade, Yo lag Village, Reb gong (Tongren) County, Rma lho (Huangnan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Mtsho sngon (Qinghai) Province, PR China. The seventy-one members of this group focus on local events. In April 2019, a local elder suddenly passed away. Related oral WeChat exchanges during the first day of mourning for the deceased between 13:26 and 20:19 hours on 17 April 2019 are presented in translation. Brief written messages are indicated with TTM (Tibetan Text Message). This specific exchange between group members exemplifies contemporary WeChat communications.

KEYWORDS

Amdo Tibetan, Mtsho sngon (Qinghai), Tibetan studies, WeChat

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†Pad+ma rig 'dzin. 2019. Ra rgan tshang: An A mdo Tibetan Herder's WeChat Group. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 58:234-238.

WeChat is used by many Tibetan communities. Ra rgan tshang, a WeChat group associated with Ra rgan ru khag 'brigade', Yo lag Village, Reb gong (Tongren) County, Rma lho (Huangnan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Mtsho sngon (Qinghai) Province, China is an example of such communities. The seventy-one members of this group focus on local events. In April 2019, a Ra rgan elder suddenly passed away. I recorded and translated related oral WeChat exchanges during the first day of mourning for the deceased between 13:26 and 20:19 on 17 April 2019. I indicate brief written messages with TTM (Tibetan Text Message) and give the participants' WeChat names, which may not be their real names.

17 April 2019 13:26

Rgas bu chung: Hello! Ra rgan<sup>1</sup> residents, the old man of Bsod nams rgyal's family suddenly died of illness. Did you hear about this?

Char ba: Yes, they asked us to come to the winter pasture.<sup>2</sup>

'Brog pa: Oh, I heard it just now. It is true. Now, we must go to the winter pasture.

'Grig mthun tshong ba: Hello everyone of Ra rgan! Is anyone going to Bsod nams rgyal's home right now?

'Brog pa: Of course, all residents will go there. I'm at the Township Town now, and we have started to move.

Snang skyid bu lo: Yes, I want to go there.

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<sup>1</sup> Ra rgan refers to Brigade Number One, Yo lag Village.

<sup>2</sup> The area where the family lives in winter.

'Broḡ pa: Hey, you [Snang skyid bu lo] shouldn't go, I have to go there.<sup>1</sup>

Snang skyid bu lo: OK. [TTM]

Gangs 'od: Hi, Ra rgan people. Was the Bsod nams rgyal's family elder the one who passed away? I'm in Reb gong [County Town] right now. Please send one person with dedication offerings here. We can deal with everything that should be done here.

Nyi 'od: OK, we received your message.

'Broḡ pa: OK! Yeah, that's what they said. We also didn't hear it until just now.

Gang 'od: Oh, people in Mdo ba, please go quickly to the home. It happened unexpectedly, so the family isn't prepared, so you all go there quickly and help the family.

Char ba: OK. [TTM]

Rdza skyes gang bu: OK. [TTM]

6677: Hey, Ra rgan people, I heard it just now. Do we need to go to the winter pasture?

Mi 'gyur: Yes, we do.

6677: OK.

Gang 'od: Hello, Ra rgan Group, our community leader should be responsible for *myig sngun*,<sup>2</sup> and others should be responsible for

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<sup>1</sup> Their relationship is father and son. Because of the importance of this event, elders are expected to go first.

<sup>2</sup> Money given to the deceased's surviving relatives including their sons, daughters, brothers, sisters, and parents.

chanting and other religious activities during this period. You all must work hard during the mourning period and please make good arrangements for cooks and receiving guests from other areas.

G.yu 'brug thod dkar: Hey, I got your voice messages. No problem. We have already discussed that elders are asked to come in the following days, although they won't have much to do, but they should all come on time and receive guests in front of the house of the deceased. We didn't select cooks, just chose some dependable young people. Each day there will be eight cooks, and there is a schedule for all of them.

Char ba: Hey, I just came online. I send the schedule for cooks here, but I need to say more because some of you can't read. Cooks need to take turns during these five days,<sup>1</sup> so each person only needs to work for one day, from six AM to nine PM. The important thing is to come as early as possible and leave as late as possible. Besides, you have to come on the days when you are not a cook, unless you are very busy.

Nnang skyid bu lo: OK. (Subsequently, dozens of members sent text messages in Tibetan, saying "OK.")

This exchange illustrates critical local concerns. Before 2011, residents went home to home to report an important event, or someone climbed to the top of a hill and shouted to a group of families, announcing the news. Similarly, families transmitted news to other families near them. Generally, locals are fond of WeChat, although they complain that this modern communication tool disturbs their daily activities, such as chanting, circumambulation, and

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<sup>1</sup> The deceased's sky burial was to take place five days later. Local monks generally consult a calendar and/or a scripture in order to determine the dates. In the period before the sky burial, local community members are expected to help the deceased's family.

communication between family members. Nevertheless, locals appreciate this powerful tool that spreads word of, informs, and provides a mechanism to discuss public events.

#### TIBETAN TERMS

'brog pa འབྲོག་པ།  
 'grig mthun tshong ba འགྲིག་མཐུན་ཚོང་བ།  
 bsod nams rgyal བསོད་ནམས་རྒྱལ།  
 char ba ཇར་བ།  
 g.yu 'brug thod dkar གཡུ་འབྲུག་ཐོད་དཀར།  
 gangs 'od གངས་འོད།  
 mi 'gyur མི་འགྱུར།  
 mtsho sngon མཚོ་སྔོན།  
 ra rgan tshang རྩ་རྒན་ཚང།  
 rdza skyes gang bu རྩ་སྐྱེས་གང་བུ།  
 reb gong རེབ་གོང།  
 ra rgan ར་རྒན།  
 rgas bu chung རྒས་བུ་ཅུང།  
 rma lho ར་ལྷོ།  
 ru khag རུ་ཁག།  
 snang skyid bu lo སྤང་སྐྱིད་བུ་ལོ།

#### CHINESE TERMS

Huangnan 黄南  
 Qinghai 青海  
 Tongren 同仁